



**Political Access for People with Disabilities
Briefing Paper Series**

**PROMOTING THE INCLUSION OF PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN CIVIL
REGISTRATION AND MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS IN KOSOVO**

**Kosovo Case Study
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Pilot Technical Assistance Project in Kosovo

There is a significant presence in Kosovo of international forces and agencies, working in coordination to rebuild the physical infrastructure, to strengthen civil society, and to create sustainable social, political, educational, and economic institutions. Two critically important parts of this endeavor are (a) the civil and voter registration of residents of Kosovo and (b) the convening of municipal elections. These activities, vital to a healthy citizenry, are being designed and carried out under the authority of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and the United Nations Civil Administration.

In particular, the OSCE and the UN (Pillars II and III) have joint responsibility for civil registration, and the OSCE has primary responsibility for organizing municipal elections.

At the invitation of the OSCE, the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) was invited to provide technical assistance to promote greater inclusion of people with disabilities in both the civil registration and municipal elections. IFES undertook this activity as part of the technical assistance aspect of its Disability Access Project funded by the Foreign Ministry of Finland. This technical assistance was provided by IFES Disability Consultant Jerome Mindes, in June 2000.

Disability in Kosovo: An Overview

According to Handikos, a local organization of Kosovars with disabilities, there are approximately 40,000 people with disabilities in Kosovo. This number is based on the very conservative estimate that 3 to 5 percent of the entire population is somehow disabled. Handikos has surveyed and identified approximately 16,000 people with disabilities. Handikos has been recognized by the international development community in Kosovo as a reliable partner, and has received direct funding and support from such entities as Handicap International and the Foreign Ministry of Finland.

Groundwork Laid by OSCE

In the weeks leading up to the provision of technical assistance by IFES consultant Jerome Mindes, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo made key contacts with the local organization of people with disabilities, Handikos. These contacts were primarily undertaken by Mr. Jeff Fischer, IFES' senior project adviser who has been seconded to the OSCE and the UN to serve as the head of the Joint Registration Task Force and the Director of Election Operations in Kosovo. The contacts with Handikos culminated in the appointment of Handikos President Hallit Ferizi to a seat on the Central Election Commission of Kosovo as an alternate member.

The significance of this appointment cannot be understated. It placed Mr. Ferizi – and the issues of importance to Handikos – on the key governmental panel with decision making responsibility for the elections processes, and it contributed immeasurably to ensuring that the registration and election processes were inclusive of people with disabilities. Mr. Ferizi's appointment also helped to contribute to the overall sustainability of IFES efforts in Kosovo.

IFES Technical Assistance: The Basic Approach

Under its program to promote electoral access for people with disabilities, the IFES approach has been to identify and collaborate with local disability organizations. Each and every aspect of IFES' work in Kosovo, therefore, has benefited from the full involvement, expertise, and leadership of Handikos members from all over Kosovo.

In every meeting and conversation with Handikos officials, it was clear that the local disability leadership wanted to maximize the public and therefore visible participation of people with disabilities in both civil registration and the municipal elections. This would ensure that people with disabilities were visible within and by their communities, and would help to counter the existing social patterns in which people with disabilities in Kosovo are segregated and isolated from their communities.

This effort to promote visible, public participation guided IFES' work and its recommendations to the OSCE and the UN.

Technical Assistance Intervention: Overview

In Kosovo, civil registration is the prerequisite for civic participation. It is the mechanism through which residents of Kosovo secure an identity within their community and society. It is the mechanism through which residents of Kosovo become eligible for social services and travel documents. It is the mechanism through which residents of Kosovo become eligible to vote and to seek public office.

The following paragraphs outline specific actions designed by IFES to promote greater participation of people with disabilities in the civil registration and voting processes set to take place in Kosovo. In each instance, the OSCE and/or the UN took action to implement the IFES recommendations.

Recommendation I: Promoting Civil Registration for Individuals with Disabilities

The objective of this recommendation is to encourage as many people with disabilities as possible to participate in Civil Registration activities. The goal is important because it promotes the full and visible participation in the registration process of people with disabilities. The recommendation was implemented by the OSCE/UN Joint Registration Task Force during the final weeks of the open civil registration process, in late June and early July, 2000. The effort included the following:

Public outreach: On June 27, 2000, outreach officers from the Joint Registration Task Force (JRT) conducted a training program for 25 members of Handikos. The Handikos representatives were from its central office in Pristina, and from regional centers throughout Kosovo. The purpose of the training was to ensure that Handikos leaders were fully aware of the July deadline for civil registration, and equally aware of the specific document which prospective residents must bring with them to the registration venue. The JRT provided printed brochures and other written materials pertinent to the civil registry process. Following the training, Handikos leaders were responsible for disseminating this information among their local networks.

Transportation to Registration Sites: In consultation with the Joint Registration Task Force, Handikos decided to arrange transportation to registration sites for residents with disabilities who lack the mobility to reach the venues. Handikos used its own fleet of vehicles to undertake this effort.

Public Information: To support the Handikos effort, the JRT used its public information tools to encourage individuals with disabilities to participate in civil registration, and to avail themselves of the Handikos transportation effort. In the final weeks of the open civil registration process, the JRT produced and aired a series of public information radio announcements, encouraging people with disabilities to participate in civil registration. The radio spots provided the Handikos telephone number for those requiring transportation assistance, and informed people with disabilities that they would be given priority status at the registration lines.

Promoting Access to JRT Registration Centers: To further encourage the participation of people with disabilities in civil registration, the JRT refurbished approximately 90 registration sites with ramps for wheelchair accessibility. The JRT also instructed its field office staff to provide assistance if requested to anyone with a disability attempting to register; to allow people with disabilities to use the most accessible registration venue in their municipality; and to give priority status to people with disabilities (and the elderly, pregnant women, and others deemed necessary) so that they do not have to wait in long registration lines. These decisions were communicated by the JRT leadership to field staff and to Handikos officials.

Promoting Public Awareness: To highlight its commitment to the full participation of people with disabilities, the Joint Registration Task Force selected as its symbolic one-millionth registrant an individual with a disability. This individual – a wheelchair user from Pristina -- was involved with other disability leaders in public concerts and activities celebrating the culmination of the civil registration process, sharing the stage with leaders from the local and international communities. These activities received prominent attention in the local press.

Recommendation II: Promoting Full Participation by Voters with Disabilities

In the weeks leading up to the October 28 municipal elections in Kosovo, it is fully expected that OSCE/Elections and Handikos will continue to collaborate to maximize the public, visible participation of people with disabilities. This collaboration will include specially designed outreach and public information efforts, special instructions to the elections field offices granting voters with disability priority status; implementing special accommodations to ensure voting site accessibility; and a complementary “private” effort by Handikos to provide transportation to voters requiring assistance in traveling to voting sites.

Recommendation III: In-Home Voting for Individuals with Severe Mobility Impairments

This goal recognizes that some individuals – due to the severity of their mobility impairments -- will not be able to participate in civil registration, and thus, without special interventions, will be ineligible to vote.

The goal, therefore, was to provide an opportunity for these individuals to be visited in their home by a mobile team from OSCE/Elections, so that they could register for voting -- and vote in the municipal elections -- in one step.

In collaboration with OSCE/Elections and Handikos, IFES consultant Jerome Mindes developed an implementation plan for In-Home Registration and Voting for individuals with several mobility impairments. Individuals requiring “In-Home Registration and Voting” will be identified by Handikos, and visited by an OSCE Elections Mobile Team in the two-week period prior to the municipal elections slated to be held on October 28, 2000. To date, Handikos has identified approximately 400

individuals requiring this service. OSCE Elections will mobilize at least one team in each of Kosovo's five election regions to serve this population.

The implementation plan developed by IFES and adopted by OSCE/Elections will enfranchise Kosovars who otherwise would be unable to participate in the municipal elections.

Applying the Model to Other Marginalized Groups: OSCE/Elections recognized that the model developed by IFES to reach individuals with severe mobility impairments could also apply to other marginalized or segregated segments of the population. In August 2000, under a direct grant from the OSCE, Jerome Mindes returned to Kosovo to develop an implementation plan for OSCE/Elections Mobile Teams to provide registration and voting not only for homebound individuals with disabilities, but also for individuals in prisons, for individuals in hospitals, and for individuals with disabilities residing at the Pristina Elderly Home and the Shtimlje Mental Institute.

This model, developed by IFES under the grant from Finland, will be used by OSCE/Elections to enfranchise thousands of individuals – many of whom have disabilities -- who otherwise would not be able to participate in the October 28 municipal elections.

Recommendation IV: Residents of Institutions

As mentioned, OSCE/Elections will undertake special efforts to reach individuals who reside at the Pristina Elderly Home and the Shtimlje Mental Institute. These populations were not visited during the open civil registration process which ended on July 19, 2000.

Under plans mentioned above, OSCE/Elections will conduct a special effort to provide eligible individuals residing in these two institutions with an opportunity to vote in the October municipal elections.

But many residents – particularly at the Shtimlje Mental Institute – may not have the mental capacity to participate as voters in the election process. In a visit to the Institute by IFES consultant Jerome Mindes, it was evident that years of mistreatment and abuse had rendered many residents isolated and estranged from human interaction. However, it is important that these residents be given an opportunity to participate in civil registration, and thus, to have an identify as a resident of Kosovo.

Toward this end, IFES consultant Jerome Mindes met with the Institute Director and with representatives of the Norwegian Red Cross – the lead international agency servicing the residents at Shtimlje – to jointly develop a plan for civil registration of residents at the Shtimlje Mental Institute. Mr. Mindes also met with UNMIK authorities who will have responsibility for civil registration after the October elections, to ensure that Shtimlje residents are included in ongoing civil registration efforts.

Conclusion

As a result of IFES' intervention in Kosovo under the grant from Finland, the following was achieved:

-- The UN/OSCE Joint Registration Task Force worked closely with Handikos – a local disability organization – to encourage individuals with disabilities to participate fully in the civil registration process, conducting public outreach and information campaigns, and implementing field-based procedures to accommodate the needs of people with disabilities.

-- OSCE/Elections will continue to work with Handikos to encourage individuals with disabilities to vote in the municipal elections on October 28, and will implement field-based procedures to accommodate the needs of voters with disabilities.

-- OSCE/Elections will deploy several Mobile Election Teams to provide registration and voting opportunities for individuals with severe mobility impairments to vote in their homes; for residents of the Pristina Elderly Institute and the Shtimlje Mental Institute to register and vote at their facilities; and for residents of hospitals and prisons to register and vote in their facilities.

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